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ABSTRACT

This paper describes, analyzes, and compares local accountability environments in 23 school districts in 8 states, taking the formal external system and informal expectations into account. Data are drawn from a 3-year longitudinal study of standards-based reform in eight states: California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas. Researchers visited the 23 school districts to interview district staff and conducted site visits in 33 elementary schools in 4 states. Findings show that state-defined and district-defined accountability systems and policies did provide a clear focus for teachers and principals about the attainment of student outcomes, but educators generally faced few formal consequences for not meeting school, district, and state performance goals. When formal consequences did exist, they fell more heavily on students and principals than on teachers. Teachers faced few consequences for poor student performance. Although districts generally did not use student performance data for sanctioning personnel, achievement data were vital to district and school-based decision making. Many of the study districts used the school improvement planning process as a major instrument to inform and foster change. (SLD)

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Local Accountability: The Role of the District and School in Monitoring Policy, Practice and Achievement

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Local Accountability: The Role of the District and School in Monitoring Policy, Practice and Achievement

States have historically used accountability policies as a way of monitoring and regulating education in their communities. Traditionally, state accountability policies were designed to ensure a minimum level of educational inputs (for example, the number and type of staff in a school and the number of books in the library), a minimum level of quality in these inputs (for example, the use of certified staff), access to educational programs and services (such as minimum course offerings and programs for students with special needs) and the proper use of education resources. The school district was the primary target of these accountability systems, and states relied on accreditation processes and program monitoring to ensure compliance with these input and process standards.

Under the standards-based reforms of the 1990s, accountability systems are expected to promote academic achievement as well as monitor the condition of education in districts and states. Adams and Kirst (1999) argue that "in an ideal system, performance-based accountability focuses educational policy, administration, and practice directly on teaching and learning...by defining goals, allocating authority, managing incentives, building capacity, measuring progress, reporting results, and enforcing consequences, all related to student performance" (p. 464). This shift in purpose has brought with it a change in emphases of accountability systems: (1) from school districts to the performance of individual schools; (2) from input and process standards to student outcome standards; (3) from basic skills to high academic expectations for all students; and (4) from the use of compliance with rules to the use of sanctions and incentives to drive changes in school and district behaviors.

These changes have been reinforced by amendments to the federal government's two largest education programs: Title I of Improving America's Schools Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Title I requires that states establish challenging content and performance standards in at least reading and mathematics, develop high quality assessments to measure performance on these standards, define and measure the "adequate yearly progress" of schools and districts against these standards, and have local districts identify low-performing schools as in need of school improvement. IDEA requires that states include students with disabilities in state and district assessment programs with appropriate accommodations and disaggregate and report their test scores.

State accountability systems have received considerable attention in the press lately. On the one hand, researchers and reporters alike laud the success of the Texas and North Carolina systems in raising the academic performance of their students and narrowing the performance gap between White students and students of color (c.f., Grissmer and Flanagan, 1998). On the other hand, students in Massachusetts recently refused to participate in their new state assessment (Steinberg, 2000), and civil rights advocates have charged in court that high stakes accountability systems discriminate against poor and minority students (e.g., the Committee for

Fiscal Equity in New York and the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund in Texas).

Less attention has been paid to the role of districts and schools in monitoring policy, practice and student achievement. Indeed, the district has become almost invisible in recent literature on school reform and both federal and state legislation focus on schools as the most important unit in the change process. But despite this emphasis, districts do continue to play a large role in the life of public schools, acting as gatekeepers for accountability policies by translating, interpreting, supporting or blocking action on their behalf (Massell and Goertz, 1999). Accountability systems in districts, however, do not just revolve around externally-defined student outcome measures and indices of school performance. Other measures, such as principal or teacher evaluations, are often more regular and more immediate in the lives of staff.

In this paper, I describe, analyze and compare local accountability environments in 23 districts located in 8 states, taking the formal external system and informal expectations into account. The paper addresses two questions. First, what do local accountability systems look like in different state accountability contexts? To what extent and how do districts interpret state accountability systems or design their own? Second, what are schools and educators really being held accountable for? To what extent do districts' formal and informal systems hold schools and staff responsible for state and local academic standards and performance or for other valued behaviors that extend beyond or possible conflict with state standards?

Study Methodology

The findings in this paper are drawn from a three-year longitudinal study of standards-based reform in eight states conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). These states—California, Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas—were relatively early implementers of standards-based reform. The research team collected extensive information on state assessment, accountability and related policies in fall 1996 and fall 1998. We have continued to track changes in state policy through our state-based researchers, *Education Week*, and state web sites.

In spring 1998 and spring 1999, researchers visited 23 school districts—two in California and three each in the other seven states—where they interviewed district staff responsible for accountability and assessment, curriculum and instruction, professional development, low-performing schools and federal programs. These districts were selected for their activism in school improvement and standards-based reform but were demographically diverse.[1] In 1998, the researchers also conducted site visits in 33 elementary schools located in the California, Kentucky, Maryland and Michigan districts. The school sample was expanded in 1999 to

[1] The districts ranged in size from 2,600 to more than 300,000 students, and from less than 1% to more than 95% students of color. Six of the districts had fewer than 30% of their students participating in the free and reduced school lunch programs; nine had more than 60% of their students enrolled in this program.

include 24 schools in study districts in Colorado, Florida and Texas. At least two of the three schools in each district participate in the Title I program. Site visitors interviewed principals and school improvement committee chairs in both years, and surveyed teachers in grades 2 to 5 in each building in 1999. The district fieldwork does not reflect changes made after spring 1999 to state accountability policies in California, Colorado, Florida and Kentucky.

State Accountability Context

While all eight study states embarked on standards-based reform in the early to mid-1990s, they developed somewhat different state accountability policies. Specifically, they varied along one or more of five dimensions: (1) Who is held accountable? (2) For what and how are they held accountable? (3) Who sets performance standards and goals? (4) What are the consequences of meeting (or not meeting) these goals? (5) Who is included in the accountability system?

We compared the eight state systems along these five dimensions based on the policies in place in spring 1999.[2] The states are quite similar in three regards. First, nearly all have some form of student accountability. All but Kentucky require students to pass a state and/or local assessment in order to graduate from high school. Two states have some kind of promotion policy for earlier grades as well. California requires districts to develop standards that students must pass to be promoted at "pivotal" points, such as the third, fifth and eighth grades. Colorado students who are not reading on grade level by the end of third grade cannot move on to fourth grade reading instruction. Second, most of the states hold schools, as well as students, accountable for student performance. Third, all of the states include state assessment results in their student and school accountability policies, and most include non-cognitive indicators in their measures of school performance.

"Locally-defined" Accountability Systems

State policies diverge, however, in three critical areas: (1) who sets performance expectations; (2) the consequences or "stakes" of the school accountability policies; and (3) who is included in the accountability system. In three of the states--California, Colorado and Minnesota--districts were primarily responsible for setting performance standards and goals at the time of our field work and there appeared to be no, or limited consequences, if districts did not meet their goals. I will characterize these as "locally-defined" accountability systems.

California, for example, had a voluntary Challenge Initiative that called for districts to agree to meet specific growth targets on multiple measures selected by the district. Districts had to show a decrease in the percentage of students not meeting district-determined grade-level expectations and an increase in the percentage of students exceeding grade-level expectations, with a concurrent decrease in the dropout rate in middle and high schools. The consequences for

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[2] California, Colorado, Florida and Kentucky changed elements of their state accountability systems after our field work in spring 1999. These are discussed below.

not meeting these goals were unclear.[3] Districts also selected measures and set criteria for high school graduation. In 1998, the state required that districts incorporate results from the state's new Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program test (currently the Stanford/9) into their local accountability systems, and set criteria for local assessments, grade-level performance on the STAR test, and for combining multiple measures.[4]

Colorado's accountability program, the Enterprise Accreditation Contracts (EAC), was designed to link district-developed improvement plans to accreditation. The state and districts were to negotiate six year contracts that included descriptions of how districts will manage and oversee school accreditation, and how the district would improve student performance as measured against district and state academic standards, including procedures for assisting low performing schools. The state's role was to be limited to monitoring district performance results and compliance with EAC procedures. While the state would not judge the content of the plans, it could intervene with corrective action if the districts did not comply with the school accreditation process. Colorado districts would continue to develop performance-based assessments and set high school graduation standards. Like California, Colorado set different and more specific performance standards for Title I schools.[5]

Minnesota's role in accountability has been limited to the use of a basic skills assessment for high school graduation. Districts have the authority to increase the student passing score of 75% on this state assessment, but few have done so. They also design programs of studies and assessments to measure student performance on the state's more rigorous Profiles of Learning. Beyond the state reporting system, districts have discretion as to how schools will be held accountable.

"State-defined" Accountability Systems

Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan and Texas can be characterized as "state-defined" accountability systems. Here, the state sets performance goals for students, schools and/or school systems and holds these individuals and units directly accountable for meeting

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[3] For Title I, districts were to report the percent of students meeting or exceeding local standards and to identify for program improvement any Title I school in which fewer than 40 percent of students met or exceeded these standards.

[4] California enacted a new Public School Accountability Act in April 1999. This law called for the development of an Academic Performance Index (API) for every school, the establishment of annual growth targets based on the 1999-2000 API, and the creation of an intervention and assistance program for low-performing schools and a system of rewards for improving and/or high-scoring schools. The API and growth targets, which were based on SAT-9 results, were released in January 2000.

[5] Colorado passed legislation in August 1998 giving the state the authority to accredit schools and establish accreditation indicators but the state did not act on this authority. In March 2000, the legislature enacted a system to grade schools based on overall performance and improvement on the state assessment. This new system will be put into place in the 2000-2001 school year.

these goals. The state also establishes rewards for meeting or exceeding state goals and sanctions for not meeting their target. Schools in decline could be eligible for assistance, intervention and possible reconstitution or takeover by the state. If schools made significant progress over time, they could receive financial rewards. Districts can exceed or supplement state programs, but not make critical choices or changes. In addition, state accountability systems are tightly aligned to Title I program requirements.

These states differed, however, in the particulars of their state policies. Two differences appear to have implications for district response to state accountability systems: (1) whether the state establishes a fixed or relative performance target; and (2) how high it sets performance expectations.

Florida and Texas, for example, set absolute performance targets for their schools. In 1998-99, Texas gave an "acceptable" rating to schools in which at least 45 percent of students in each subgroup passed the state assessment and that met minimum attendance and dropout rates. This threshold reached a ceiling of a 50 percent passing rate in 1999-2000. Florida's goal was set slightly lower; only one-third of each elementary school's students (and 40 percent of each middle school's students) had to score above the 50th percentile on the state reading and mathematics assessments to avoid being classified as a "critically low-performing school."[6] In contrast, Kentucky and Maryland expected 100 percent and 70 percent of their students, respectively, to meet their state's standard of proficient performance on the state assessment. Schools were held accountable for continuous progress toward these goals as well as ultimately achieving these goals (by the year 2012 in Kentucky and the year 2000 in Maryland).[7] In addition to having higher performance goals, their state assessments were considered more rigorous than those used by Florida and Texas at the time.

District Accountability Systems

This section looks at how the study districts constructed accountability systems within these different state contexts. The district descriptions are based on interviews with district-level respondents and with principals in a subset of schools in the CPRE study. It is important to remember that these schools and districts are not representative of schools and districts generally in their states. They were chosen for the study because they were proactive in designing and/or

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[6] Under its new A+ Plan for Education, Florida grades schools on a scale of A to F. A school earns each grade by meeting specific performance standards; these standards are higher than those set under the previous system. In addition, students attending a school that is graded F for two years out of four may transfer to a public school rated a C or better (or, if it survives a court challenge, use state-funded vouchers at private schools). The first set of school grades was based on 1998-99 data.

[7] In 1999, Kentucky modified its assessment system, reweighted the cognitive and non-cognitive components of its accountability index, recalculated each district's accountability index and reset each district's short and long-term target performance goals. The new baseline year is 1999-2000, and districts have until 2014 to reach a target index of 100.

implementing standards-based reforms. With this caveat in mind, I look first at districts located in what I have called "locally-defined" accountability systems, and then at districts located in the "state-defined" systems.

In States with "Locally-defined" Accountability Systems

Not surprisingly, there was significant variation in the design of local accountability systems in states with "locally-defined" accountability systems. Local accountability systems ranged from highly centralized, sophisticated systems that held schools accountable for student performance on multiple measures ("district-defined" systems) to highly decentralized systems where schools set goals and chose performance measures ("school-defined" systems).

One of our California districts provides an example of a comprehensive, centralized accountability system. The district has developed standards (which are being realigned against the revised state standards) and proficiency measures in both literacy (reading and writing) and mathematics. Students were assigned proficiency levels by combining their standardized test results and scores from a set of district performance tests. The district goal was to have at least 90% of students proficient in district literacy and mathematics standards. Schools were responsible for improving the global proficiency rating (a combination of four mathematics and reading tests) of all students and meeting the other goals of their school improvement plans. The district had developed a program of rewards and technical assistance for improving and struggling schools, respectively.

In contrast, schools set their own goals in the Colorado study districts. One district, for example, requires that schools measure progress using district assessments, and the district accountability committee reviews schools' plans. The district does not set performance targets, however, and there are no formal consequences if schools do not meet their own goals. This district was "flirting" with the idea of setting an acceptable range of performance gains for schools if the state implemented its EAC program. In another district, schools' foci for school achievement goals vary dramatically. Schools chose different areas of achievement to address, and use different metrics to determine achievement, including the number of students at the proficient level, a year's worth of improvement, or improvement by the lowest performers.

This variation reflects differences in district culture, leadership and capacity. Our two California study sites viewed standards-based reform as a critical strategy for raising student performance. They had spent several years developing district systemic change strategies composed of standards, and assessments, accountability and professional development aligned to district (and state) standards. These high capacity districts, which are among the larger school systems in California, were generally ahead of the rest of their state. A study of a larger and more representative sample of California districts conducted in spring 1999 found that most districts were in the early stages of developing their local standards-based accountability systems (WestEd/MAP, 2000).

The actions of the Colorado districts reflected both a strong tradition of decentralized management and a limited capacity to support or monitor school actions. Although the districts were developing assessments keyed to local standards and creating accountability plans in

anticipation of state action, school level accountability had not become a central strategy for engendering reform. Indeed, some respondents felt that state reporting of assessment results would foster a feeling of competition among the schools, threatening collaborative efforts within their districts. The superintendent in one of these districts was trying to regain some authority over her schools, but her local school board staunchly defends school site autonomy. Stagnation in state education funding, coupled with increases in enrollment and districts needs (e.g., English language learners), had led to cutbacks in district staff in all three districts. This, in turn, limited the ability of central office staff to work with the schools.

Districts with "school-defined" accountability systems had separate accountability policies for their Title I and non-Title I schools. Our Colorado and Minnesota study districts held Title I schools accountable under state policies that were not applicable to non-Title I schools. Colorado, for example, calculated a School Index for its Title I schools using student performance on state reading and mathematics assessments. Title I schools were held accountable for moving all students toward a state-defined level of proficiency, while the non-Title I schools in our sample set their own goals. Similarly, Minnesota established performance requirements for Title I schools (an increase of two NCEs and 60 percent of students meeting district standards), but our Minnesota districts did not have performance goals for non-Title I schools.

In States with "State-defined" Accountability Systems

All of the study districts in states with "state-defined" accountability systems used the state system as the basis of their district systems. Under their state laws, districts must use state criteria at a minimum to hold their schools accountable for student progress and to identify schools in need of improvement. As one respondent noted, "The state [accountability] system is our [accountability] system." While districts do not have the discretion to interpret state provisions, they may establish criteria and/or procedures that exceed state requirements.

A few districts raised performance standards when they viewed state standards as too low. In Texas, all three districts were rated as "academically acceptable"[8] at the time of our field work, and set higher standards for themselves. The goal in two of the districts was to be rated "recognized;" in the third, to be rated "exemplary."

Districts in states with higher performance standards added performance incentives for schools that make progress but do not quality for rewards under the state definition. Maryland

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[8] A district was rated as "academically acceptable" in 1998-99 if 45% of students in each of three subgroups (gender, race/ethnicity, low-income) passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), required improvement was demonstrated in all low-performing content areas and schools, and schools met minimum dropout rate standards; "recognized" if at least 75% of all students and students in each group passed each subject area (and schools had lower dropout rates); and "exemplary" if at least 90% of all students and students in each group passed each subject area (and schools had still lower dropout rates). In addition, a district cannot be rated "recognized" or "exemplary" if it has one or more low-performing schools.

provides monetary rewards to schools that show substantial, sustained and statistically significant improvement on the state's SPI. While showing progress, few schools in our three study districts have qualified for the state reward. Two of our study districts, however, provide their own monetary rewards to schools to encourage their reform efforts. One of these districts provides funds to schools that show improvement on at least one of the state accountability criteria; schools that improve on multiple criteria receive larger rewards. The other district rewards elementary schools that have the largest increases in test scores (taking into account school size and socio-economic composition). All schools in both districts have received some money under the local reward systems.

Several districts created student benchmarking systems mapped against state or district goals to ensure that students in all grades are on track to meet state standards and to focus attention on the lower performing students. The impetus for one Kentucky district's accountability system was the state's new high school graduation standards that require all students to complete algebra and geometry in high school. To ensure that all students will graduate reading and able to do math at the 12th grade level, this district instituted a "competency assurance plan" that measures student performance against grade level standards throughout his or her career. It holds teachers and principals accountable for documenting the progress of low performing students--currently by assessing them 3 times a year in math and reading using school-selected assessments. The district is in the process of identifying grade level outcomes and district-wide assessments. Two of the Maryland districts use both district-designed end of unit tests and teacher-generated running records to measure student progress against district goals (which are aligned with state goals). No consequences are tied to these assessments, however, and use of these data varies across the schools. A Texas district in the study created a timeline for teaching the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and devised benchmark exams to check student progress on the TEKS twice a year. Results of the benchmarks exams are used to help teachers, identify problems and gaps in the curriculum timeline and identify students who need additional assistance.

Finally, states with state-defined accountability systems generally have similar expectations and policies for both Title I and non-Title I schools. Schools are held to the same goals and similar criteria are used to identify schools in need of assistance. Title I schools, however, generally had access to more resources. In one district, for example, all Title I schools are assigned a "reader leader." In other districts, Title I funds support Reading Recovery kinds of programs.

Who is Really Held Accountable?

Accountability systems create incentives for school and school system improvement by focusing attention on student outcomes and progress, providing data for decision making, and creating a press for more and better measures of student performance. This section looks at the incentive structures embedded in these state and district accountability systems.

State-defined and district-defined (centrally) accountability systems and policies provided a clear focus to teachers and principals regarding the attainment of student outcomes.

Respondents in one Florida district reported, for example, that the state assessment system coupled with sanctions for low performance focused district attention on the three tested areas: reading, writing and mathematics. Respondents in the Colorado study districts noted that state assessments and student promotion policies in literacy had increased their focus on reading and writing. One district, for example, focused on language arts for three years--phasing in a new reading series and emphasizing ELA topics in professional development. A principal in this district noted that

> *up to that time, it seemed that we would have this goal one year, then this year, this one. We were just too scattered, and it was very frustrating because at the elementary level, we were having some new content change. It was too much.* (CO3).

In all three Texas study districts, the state accountability system has focused educator attention on the TEKS. It drives the selection of curriculum, prompts professional development, has initiated the development of interim assessments, and drives the identification of schools and students needing additional help. Local accountability systems in the two California districts emphasized literacy and mathematics instruction. Respondents in the Maryland districts stressed that the persistence of that state's accountability program and its consistent focus are a major incentive for changing practice.

Yet, educators generally faced few formal consequences for not meeting school, district and/or state performance goals beyond those imposed by the state. Most of the study districts in Florida, Kentucky and Texas, for example, did not develop intervention plans beyond those of the state. A principal in a Florida district, for example, stated that if her school did not meet state standards, the state could step in and "rearrange" her school. Kentucky respondents noted that school sanctions involved having state Distinguished Educators work with low-performing buildings. Districts used performance data to provide support rather than to impose sanctions.

When formal consequences existed, they fell more heavily on students and principals than on teachers. The stakes were the highest for students, particularly those in states and/or districts with high school graduation and/or promotion requirements. In Minnesota, for example, respondents in all three study districts mentioned that the only stakes in their systems were for students who have to pass a state basic skills test to graduate from high school.

At the school level, the principal was the primary focus of accountability. But principal accountability was generally ill-defined. Few districts had set formal performance goals or consequences for principals, and some respondents spoke of consequences in hypothetical terms.[9] Typically, principals whose schools were posting low scores would be called in to explain their past actions, required to submit new improvement plans, and closely monitored. If their school was identified as "in crisis," media coverage was intensive. These principals might be shifted to another school or placed on a different type of assignment. They were rarely fired or demoted as the result of low student achievement.

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9 WestEd/MAP found this as well in its evaluation of California (WestEd/MAP, 2000).

Some superintendents, however, did move or remove principals from low-performing schools. One superintendent replaced nine principals in his first year in office. The new superintendent of a district in another state demoted 13 principals and two vice-principals. The superintendent of a highly decentralized district in a third state used a focus on data-driven decision-making to communicate her expectations about improved performance. These actions sent strong signals to principals that districts would hold them accountable for student performance. A principal in this third district mentioned that he had "gotten the message" about needing to perform.

> *Every day, I have to get up at sunrise, and I go to the mountain. And there, the voice of God speaks to me and says, "Did you improve those scores yet?" Nobody has ever said to me to get the scores up or else, but what I know right now in the district is that performance is expected. [He tells a story of how the superintendent disbanded the district's diversity committee because it had not produced many results.] If this woman's going to disband a diversity cadre that's been in place for ten years, she'd ban me...I saw her remove a principal three or four years ago. I don't know anything about that situation, but the principal was taken out of that building and put back in the classroom. I've seen her take a stand on teachers whose performance was not good enough...I've seen her move teachers out of positions.* (CO1)

Looking across the study sites, it appears that the strength of principal accountability policies varied more across sites within states than across accountability contexts. Four factors explain some of this variation. The first is the philosophy of the district. Some local school boards and district administrators stressed school autonomy. One superintendent opined:

> *Autocracy doesn't result in systemic change. There has to be fundamental change in approach to school administration in order to facilitate other people's growth in the process...I'm not sure it's totally right, but its better [than the old way].* (MD2)

There is no formal accountability in his district outside the state system and informal accountability tends to be light-handed as well. When there were problems in student performance, the central office staff met with principals and developed strategies to address the problems. Other school systems communicated their expectations more directly through principal evaluations. One Kentucky superintendent, for example, is using his authority to evaluate and potentially fire principals to held them accountable for student performance and for developing and implementing school plans that will improve performance. As one district respondent noted, "The district is not in control of curriculum and other things, but we are in control of expectations, of hiring and firing principals, so we can make sure that they will make their teachers accountable." (KY2)

A second factor is the size of the performance gap and the urgency of change. The district referenced above has seen test scores plateau after steady growth, and schools are not meeting their state-defined growth targets. As a result, respondents noted that was probably the first time that principals had feared being held accountable for tangible data. Another study

district has a large number of low-performing schools (with some under state sanctions) and has increased both the level of oversight and support to these buildings. Data is an element of principal evaluations and the district has removed principals in chronically low-performing schools.

Third, the political and contractual environment of the districts varied. Union contracts forbid the use of performance data in principal evaluations in at least one of our study districts. The local board of education in another district rejected a performance-based evaluation system for administrators and teachers. A few states are beginning to include student test data in their evaluation policies. Florida, for example, now requires the inclusion of student achievement data in teacher and administrator personnel evaluations, but this provision had not been implemented at the time of our field work. Texas' Professional Development Appraisal System (PDAS) also includes student performance as one of many evaluation criteria for administrators and teachers, but districts choose how they will use these data in their accountability systems. Even districts that consider student achievement in their evaluation of principals look at other measures of principal performance. Principals continue to be held responsible for a multiplicity of responsibilities, including the evaluation and development of their teaching staff, the maintenance of a positive school climate and good parent and community relationships, and the overall management of their building.

Finally, the urban districts in our study faced a shortage of principals—qualified or not. One respondent commented that hypothetically his district could transfer a principal to another school for failure to support school improvement, but principal turnover is so high they usually leave before the district can move them against their will.

Teachers, on the other hand, faced few consequences for poor student performance. Many of the teachers in our study reported that their districts and states held schools more accountable for student performance than teachers. While some districts looked at student performance, teachers were generally held accountable for the delivery of their instruction and for meeting their professional development goals. As with principals, some union contracts or school board policies forbid the inclusion of student test scores in teacher evaluations. One respondent explained his district's policy in the following way:

> *Right now the focus at the teacher level is on the delivery of instruction. We know by implication that's going to affect student achievement. We, for contract reasons, in terms of the way our teachers and it's state education code, there's no explicit teacher accountability for student results. We can't fire a teacher because their kids didn't get to a certain level on a test...So the primary accountability at the principal level and to the teacher level is the improvement of the delivery of instruction.* (CA2).

While several districts in the study were looking more closely at instructional practice, few had clear performance standards or consequences linked to these evaluations. Consequences for poor performance appeared limited to professional development, coaching and mentoring. And urban districts could not afford to fire many teachers. They are plagued by unfilled vacancies,

uncertified teachers, and staff teaching out of field. A respondent in one urban district reported that teachers leave their system on average after three years.

If current accountability systems carry weak sanctions, what then will motivate educators to pay attention to student performance standards? One answer is to provide monetary and other rewards for good performance. Research is showing that the positive consequences of accountability systems motivate school staff to work in more focused ways on state and district goals (Kelley, Milanowski, and Heneman, 1998). A growing number of state accountability systems provide rewards to schools that meet performance or growth targets. A few of the study districts reward successful principals and teachers by pulling them into districtwide activities and using them as trainers and coaches. Another incentive is the press of public reporting of student achievement data. Even in weak accountability districts, such as those in Colorado and Minnesota, respondents in our study stated that public reporting of these state assessment results—a new phenomenon in both states--captured the attention of the educators and the public. Many schools, even those not in danger of severe sanctions such as takeover, felt under pressure to improve results. They feared being labeled as "poor performers" and the accompanying professional embarrassment. As a principal in one of the study districts noted,

> *[The state assessment program] has probably been driving everything we've done. You can say you're doing it to raise students' achievement. To be honest, you're doing it because of accountability and assessment. I don't know if the whole accountability piece with rewards and sanctions is still the deal. It was at the beginning. Now it's a matter of pride. Before, we didn't want the scores to slip; now it's self-examination. Without the state assessment, I don't think that would have come into play. We may have been able to make some changes, maybe start some good things, but the degree and speed we have changed never would have happened* (KY2).

Finally, although districts generally did not use student performance data for sanctioning personnel, achievement data was a vital part of district and school-based decision-making. At a minimum, districts used student outcome data to identify low-performing schools and teachers and then target assistance. Many of the study districts used the school improvement planning process, however, as a major instrument to inform and foster change. As the superintendent of one study district reported:

> *There has been a major change in the culture of the district. We are now a data-driven district. Data can be our best ally. It has not always been considered that way, but it is hard to dispute the data regarding student achievement. The data can be compiled in such a way to create a sense of urgency that I felt was necessary to bring about change.* (TX3)

This and other districts place a strong emphasis on interpreting and using data. One of the main responsibilities of area superintendents in the larger districts is to assist each school with the development of their school improvement plan, and making sure that schools understand district and state data. Some districts provide schools with data analysts. Most provide some

kind of central office support on data interpretation and hold schools accountable for basing their school improvement plans on these analyses.

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